

I Samuel 4 When God's glory departs

Introduction

Things cannot get any worse can they? It could be a person fearing the results of another medical diagnosis? It could be a comment by anyone working in the British steel industry just now as plant after plant is closed or mothballed and the prospects for a return to secure employment and a profitable industry look bleak. They could easily have come from the mouth of Sebastian Coe as he tries to grapple with the corruption that the World Doping Agency has uncovered in the world of Athletics especially in recent weeks, but also to a lesser degree over recent years. These words could likewise be said about a whole host of situations in Syria and Iraq, Somalia or Eritrea, Libya or northern Nigeria, and other countries as well, with the prospects of yet more violence perpetrated by Islamist militias on innocent civilians who have no sympathies for their extremist ideology. The list could be endless, but in the context I Samuel 4 presents the alarming situation in a country where its people have turned their backs on God and now find that He has granted their request to 'do their own thing'. In various wars countries have often claimed that God is on their side, but have usually forgotten to ask the question whether first they are on His side? If a people fail to honour Him and choose not to live in accordance with His holy standards then they forfeit the blessings that they might otherwise have received. These early chapters of I Samuel, although directly relating to events of several millennia ago, convey very clear principles for the lives of God's people in every generation. They trumpet loud and clear to Christian Churches that if they depart from the faith and ethical standards laid down by God in His Word that there will be spiritual consequences as God withdraws His presence from their midst and His blessing on their activities. Eli's words to his wicked sons Hophni and Phinehas in I Samuel 2:25 are incredibly powerful: *If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?* His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death. Do individual people in subsequent generations take heed to such a warning? I fear not. There are sadly in every generation those people who think they can get away with ridiculing people of faith and acting as if there was no God in existence. However, I must acknowledge that the words: *There is no God* (Psalm 14:1b; 53:1b) are in the Bible, but they are prefaced by *The fool says in his heart...* (Psalm 14:1a; 53:1a). But it is not just militant atheists who exhibit their folly in the sight of Almighty God –there is something even worse! This 'something' is seen in I Samuel chapters two to four with respect to the sons of Eli, they were the leading clergymen of their generation, but were living as if there were no God, despite the words of religious truth that must have sounded from their lips sometimes in the services at Shiloh. When religious people, especially professing believers in the one true God, dishonor God and consistently, over a significant period of time, act as if there is no God to give an account to then they run the risk of facing the same fate as the sons of Eli. For those of us who have the privilege of teaching God's Word to others, James in his letter to some of the first Christian congregations makes this clear statement: *Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly* (James 3:1). In the light of these words we come to look at I Samuel chapter four.

1. The fallacy of Israel's leaders (I Samuel 4:1-4)

(a) Activities without God's blessing (I Samuel 4:1-2) *And Samuel's word came to all Israel. Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines. The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek.*² *The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. The Philistines had been encroaching on Israelite territory for some years seeking to gradually assimilate more of it into their own small state. This was a major incursion into Israelite territory that had been planned and was a serious situation. The Israelites cannot be faulted for what they did. They assembled at short notice as there was no standing army. All would have had other occupations, but with an understanding that if there was a call up to duty that they should report for service within a matter of hours. It is most likely that the Philistines had more experienced soldiers and better equipment, though both armies were probably numbered in the thousands. The details we have of the conflict are very few, but it appears that we can tentatively suggest that the fighting was fierce with the brave underdogs losing a lot more men than their enemies but broadly-speaking standing their ground against the invading forces. They were 'defeated' in the sense of both the extent of the casualties and their failure to force the enemy forces out of their land. A follow-up battle was inevitable in the days or weeks to come. Reinforcements on a grand scale would be required to overcome such a well resourced and determined foe. Yet military analysis is insufficient for describing what was going on that day. Here was a nation notionally following the God of Israel yet for the vast majority of them it was a cultural identity not a living faith that was central to their lives. They knew the right words to say –if someone had asked them- but in reality God was left out of their lives. They could not use the excuse any longer that no-one was bringing a clear word from God. The bridge verse between I Samuel 3 and I Samuel four states: *And Samuel's word came to all Israel* (I Samuel 4:1). Did that mean Samuel had engaged in an itinerant preaching ministry visiting the main tribal centres and encouraging the leaders and their clans to turn back to the Lord? Or did other people come to hear Samuel at Shiloh and then go back and share what he had proclaimed in their communities? The honest answer is that we do not know for certain- except that God had not left Himself without a witness in the nation. Yet the people had a time of national crisis and did not think to bring the matter to God. They were living on their heritage, without a real relationship with God. These are uncomfortable days in our own land when despite our wonderful Christian heritage so many people at best pay lip-service to it. Politicians plan and execute into law legislation that clearly violates God's moral standards and give no need to the protests and appeals to take a second look. But what about the churches? How much of what happens in churches up and down the land would be different if the Holy Spirit was withdrawn? How many bodies professing allegiance to Jesus Christ pass assembly and conference decisions without regard for what God has declared in His unchanging Word? I Samuel 4 is a sobering reminder that God will only for so long allow those who profess His name to stray from the pathway before judgement day comes! What form that might take is unknown, but Paul reminds us in I Corinthians 10:6: *Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. We have less excuse than Old Testament believers as we have the fuller revelation of God's standards in Jesus. The Bible is God's guidebook for our lives. The question is does it set the boundaries for our decision-making where its principles come into play? Paul again in II Timothy 3:16-17 declared: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*¹⁷ *so that the man or woman of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

(b) Requesting religion to solve our problems (I Samuel 4:3-4) *When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, ‘Why did the Lord bring defeat on us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the Lord’s covenant from Shiloh, so that He may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies.’⁴ So the people sent men to Shiloh, and they brought back the ark of the covenant of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim. And Eli’s two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.* The defeat at Aphek was unexpected by the Israelites. Like the Kurds facing ISIS in Syria and Iraq just now individual conflicts in particular localities were often too close to call. But Israel here assumed that because they were Jewish everything would be okay no matter how they lived. It wasn’t and it isn’t! In today’s context assumptions about the rightness of what happens here because we are a ‘Christian’ country. Therefore, God must bless us as a nation. Really? When all kinds of things happen that are contrary to God’s holy standards- do we really expect that a nation so privileged above most others around the world should be favoured over those who have not been so blessed in last centuries? Very few Christians in this land, unlike in the USA, assume today that providence has marked out for us a special status in history at this time. It was common here in Victorian times when the British Empire on which the sun never set was deemed to be a context in which the Gospel might spread more easily around the globe. We cannot live on our heritage. Past blessings whether personal, within our family circle or national are insufficient for the next generation. Each generation must make its covenant of loyalty with God through personal faith and trust in the living God and Saviour we serve. Forms of religion will not save us –whether taking an Ark of the Covenant into battle or some Christian religious symbols today. In the context of this story the two individuals most likely to arouse God’s anger against them turned up with the Ark of the Covenant. They were Hophni and Phinehas Eli’s two wicked sons. Saying repeated prayers, doing acts of penitence or any other such religious ritual will make no difference –if we are not truly putting our faith and trust in the Lord. Jesus can save you and me- but not religion; if we do not take Him seriously we cannot expect Him to heed our religious cries for help!

2. **The fulfillment of God’ warning** (I Samuel 4:5-11)

(a) Enthusiasm without the Spirit of God (I Samuel 4:5)⁵ *Then the ark of the Lord’s covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook.* The Ark of the Covenant was not large. It was a small gold-covered portable box 3.75 feet long by 2.25 feet wide and high carried by two priests on poles carried on their shoulders (see Exodus 25:10-22, 37:1-9, for details). Normally, it was out of sight of ordinary Israelites and priests, as it was shielded from them at Shiloh by a curtain. On the top of the Ark were carved Cherubim, angel-like figures, on which the Lord’s presence rested in the Holy of Holies in the special Tent at Shiloh (I Samuel 4:4). Once a year on the Day of Atonement the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice for his own sin and that of his family; before offering one for the nation (Leviticus 16); however, in earlier history there were a few occasions when it was visible in public. The Ark went at the head of the convoy when the Israelites tramped through the desert (Numbers 10:33-35); at the crucial launch of the adventure into the Promised Land, the priests carrying the ark were the first to walk into the water when the surging force from that time visibly began to diminish until the flow inexplicably stopped allowing the convoy of Israelites to cross with all their possessions. In fact Joshua 3:14-17 records an astonishing miracle that day: *So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the Ark of*

the Covenant went ahead of them.¹⁵ Now the Jordan is in flood all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge,¹⁶ the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (that is, the Dead Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho.¹⁷ **The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.** No person present that day would ever forget the extraordinary miracle that had taken place. The other occasion so prominent in their history was soon afterwards at Jericho when God told them to march around the city, prior to delivering it into their hands. The instructions in Joshua 6 contain these words: *March round the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. ⁴Make seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march round the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets* (Joshua 6:3-4). These are the memories that would have been in the minds of the cheering crowds that day. This action was associated with memorable victories and great miracles. But would merely repeating this historic practice be sufficient to transform their plight? The answer is a resounding 'No!' In the great scenes of the past the people were trusting in the Lord and going forward in faith and as a result experienced these extraordinary blessings. Here the nation had been engaged in tokenistic devotion to God at best and often having no time for Him at all. It was like Samson in the book of judges giving away the secret of his strength and still expecting God to deliver him out of his latest crisis. He had played games with Delilah a pagan woman and never thought his inappropriate lifestyle would catch up with him Judges 16:20 records some solemn words: Then she called, *'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!'* He awoke from his sleep and thought, *'I'll go out as before and shake myself free.'* **But he did not know that the Lord had left him.** There are no more tragic words than these. They encapsulate exactly what had happened to the nation of Israel at Aphek –but they did not know it.

We turn to our own day and generation and ask: Has God changed? When an individual or a church or some other collective group of people turns its back on God – can they really be surprised if God withdraws the help of His Spirit from them? These are most solemn words. We must never take the Lord for granted. A true believer may not lose their salvation, but to treat Him with sustained disrespect over a period of time can place a person in very real danger. God has not changed. Examples in the Bible like this time in Israel's history are there to warn us not to take chances in our relationship with the Lord.

(b) **Fear and Faith but not experienced by the people of God** (I Samuel 4:6-9) *Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, 'What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?' When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp,⁷ the Philistines were afraid. 'A god has come into the camp,' they said. 'Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before.'⁸ *We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness.⁹ Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!'* Although their grasp of biblical theology was probably rather weak, they knew enough of the extraordinary deliverance of Israel from Egypt against all the odds. Therefore, in a context where secularism and atheism were unknown and polytheism or some other form of religious belief was the norm, an expectation was aroused that a supernatural dimension to the occasion was about to be experienced. They had never seen the Ark of the Covenant appear in any previous skirmish or battle with Israel and feared for the worst. However, they mustered the courage in advance of the next and decisive battle determined not to*

be defeated without giving it their best shot. It was the enemy of the people of God who had prepared best for the day of battle. What a tragedy that the Philistines had a greater fear of God than the Israelites who were supposed to be His people. It is sobering to realize that sometimes people who profess no faith are more acutely aware of what Christians are supposed to believe and how they ought to behave. How truly does your life and mine represent our Lord and Saviour? In the attitudes and speech we display, or in our conduct, is it as the old chorus requests: Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me' (CMP410). We can shout and sing and be as demonstrative with our expressions of worship as we like in church, but if it is not seen in our priorities and commitments during the week, then we need to ask ourselves some serious questions.

(c) **The consequences of turning our backs on God** (I Samuel 4:10-11) ¹⁰ *So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers.* ¹¹ *The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.* We cannot underestimate the impact of this tragedy on the nation. Only the defeat by the Babylonians and exile in Babylon (587/6BC); the destruction of the nation of Israel in the 66-70AD war with Rome that led to the nation of Israel being obliterated and away from the land until its re-foundation as a State in 1948. In the modern era of course the Holocaust was a defining moment of the twentieth century for the Jewish people. The events described in I Samuel 4:10-11 would be in fourth place in the list of horror stories of this nation. A large proportion of the able men of the nation would have been at the scene of this slaughter. The nearest we can come to comprehending it is to place it alongside the sense of loss and grief through World War One when for the first time in the nation's modern history ordinary people were losing their lives in vast quantities on the battlefields of France and Belgium. The loss of husbands and fathers was one thing that was horrific. The priestly figureheads of the nation were also dead. It is most likely that they with the Ark of the Covenant may have been near the front of the battle, but did they know the prophecy Samuel had given to Eli about their imminent demise? I Samuel 2:34 states: *“And what happens to your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, will be a sign to you – they will both die on the same day.* It is bad enough losing a children or your children, but elderly Eli had been given advance warning that this would occur as a punishment from God for their wicked lives. Then, the loss of the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence with them, would have made it seem as if their world had ended. A prayer-less and God-less army of a nation that had turned its back on God experienced the consequences of the choices they had made. The principle is very clear. Sooner or later God acts in blessing or judgement on nations and at times with individuals as well. Unfortunately when there is national judgement the innocent inevitably are caught up with the guilty in the plight that follows. The question for each one of us individually is this: am I living a life that is pleasing to the Lord? If not, then what do I need to do to change my life to get on track with Him for the first time, or back on track with Him?

3. **The fear aroused by God's departure** (I Samuel 4:12-22)

(a) **The bearer of bad news** (I Samuel 4:12-13) *That same day a Benjaminite ran from the battle line and went to Shiloh with his clothes torn and dust on his head.* ¹³ *When he arrived, there was Eli sitting on his chair by the side of the road, watching, because his heart feared for the ark of God. When the man entered the town and told what had happened, the whole town sent up a cry.* The distance from the battlefield to the town of Shiloh was between eighteen and twenty miles mostly uphill. Only a

very fit man could leave a battlefield and complete such a run in a single day. His appearance would indicate the catastrophe that had taken place before he even opened his mouth. Yet it was not all bad news in that God was at work in the life of the nation removing wicked leaders whose behavior had caused such an outcry in the land. In their place the young prophet Samuel would direct their paths back to God again. On this particular day in Israel things looked very bleak indeed –yet God had been at work choosing the successors to Eli and his sons. In all of our lives there are times when we experience bad news and difficult times. Yet God’s grace is sufficient for all our needs when we trust Him in these times. The words God revealed to Jeremiah as he sat in the rouble heaps of Jerusalem, in agonies of spirit at the disaster that had befallen his nation and the inevitable deaths of people he loved and valued. Lamentations 3:20b- 24 states: *my soul is downcast within me.* ²¹ *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:* ²² *Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.* ²³ *They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.* ²⁴ *I say to myself, ‘The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him.’* Maybe today you are in a valley situation and you are struggling to see a way through the time of trial. The story here in I Samuel 4 was that God was very much at work here to bring about a hope and a future for the nation, yet one quite different to how the past had been. In our personal lives, family circumstances and church life our future will inevitably in some respects be quite different to how we had hoped it might be, planned for it to be, but we must go forward into the future with the confidence of knowing that God will go with us as His people.

(b) **The glory of God has departed- Ichabod** (I Samuel 4:14-22) ¹⁴ *Eli heard the outcry and asked, ‘What is the meaning of this uproar?’ The man hurried over to Eli,* ¹⁵ *who was ninety-eight years old and whose eyes had failed so that he could not see.* ¹⁶ *He told Eli, ‘I have just come from the battle line; I fled from it this very day.’ Eli asked, ‘What happened, my son?’* ¹⁷ *The man who brought the news replied, ‘Israel fled before the Philistines, and the army has suffered heavy losses. Also your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured.’* ¹⁸ *When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell backwards off his chair by the side of the gate. His neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and he was heavy. He had led Israel for forty years.* ¹⁹ *His daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant and near the time of delivery. When she heard the news that the ark of God had been captured and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she went into labour and gave birth, but was overcome by her labour pains.* ²⁰ *As she was dying, the women attending her said, ‘Don’t despair; you have given birth to a son.’ But she did not respond or pay any attention.* ²¹ *She named the boy Ichabod, saying, ‘The Glory has departed from Israel’ – because of the capture of the ark of God and the deaths of her father-in-law and her husband.* ²² *She said, ‘The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured.’* A famous football commentary by Kenneth Wolstenholme in England at least contains the lines: They think it’s all over –it is now (1966 Football World Cup before Geoff Hurst’s winning goal). It may be true in sport, but not with God. The agonies of old Eli and his daughter-in-law here are painful to read and reflect on, but the pain of her childbirth was almost symbolic of the agonies of the nation at that time as it would within a few years come through to a better place. The storms of life cannot be avoided but may we rest within the security of God’s gracious faithfulness and love to bring us through them to the better place He has for us on the other side. May we sing with our lips, but also experience in our hearts the truths of the older hymn that we treasure: Great is Thy faithfulness... (CMP200), for Jesus’ sake, Amen.